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M. Susan McWilliams

A Community Coalition Promotes Family Literacy with Story Celebrations

BY M. SUSAN MCWILLIAMS

Abstract

A coalition is typically formed between individuals or groups to bring unique strengths together in a co-operative manner to address a common cause. In our community, an alliance was formed to raise public consciousness about the impact of family reading on children's literacy development. As a coalition, we planned, organized and funded literacy-related events or story celebrations in multiple locations throughout the community. In this article, I describe and provide rationale for creating a coalition that advocates for family literacy.

"We're all Beads on One String, every man, every woman, boy and girl, Beads on One String, we're one world..."
(Warner, 2004, pp. 2 & 3)

There's something special, almost magical, about Dennis Warner's folk guitar music and singing. Most likely, the joy of listening flows from the way in which his distinctive talents come together when he performs: rich voice, professional guitar music, original tunes, and peace-oriented messages. Perhaps his ability to tell stories through music has something to do with the magic. Dennis Warner's concert was just the beginning of his residency in our community. Joining him were two storytellers and one story actor. As I listened,

I couldn't help but reflect on the planning that started months earlier enabling our coalition to bring this celebration of story to our community.

Building a Coalition to Promote Reading among Children and Families

Our coalition was built because Omaha's literacy rankings among cities of our size typically hover around mid-range: 34th out of 69 rated in cities over 250,000 (Miller, 2007). Estimates suggest 14% or nearly 68,000 people in our community are functionally illiterate (Parsons, 2009). Illiteracy is important to note because of the relationship between community literacy ratings and health, poverty status, and cultural vitality (Miller, 2007).

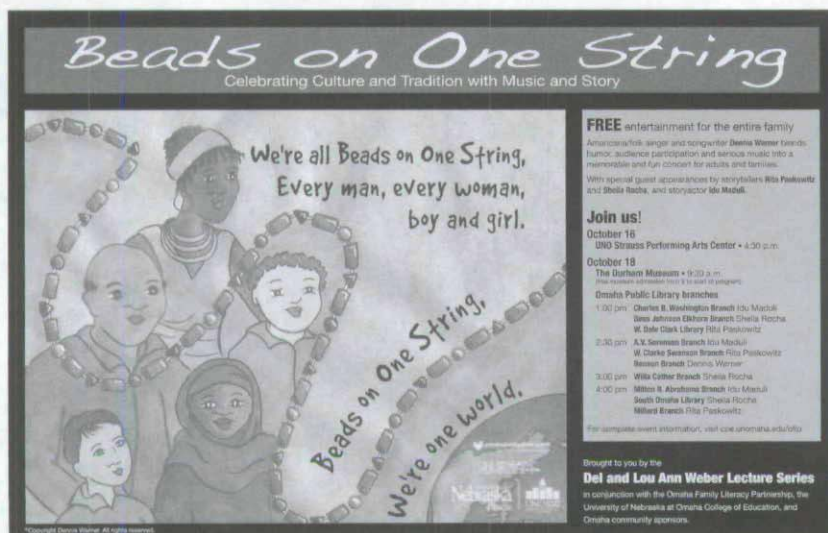


Figure 1: Self-published posters assisted us in low-cost advertising.

The posters were inspired by Warner's (2004) book illustrated by Alison Love Unzelman (© Dennis Warner, used with permission).

From the research, we know that children who are raised by illiterate or low-literate parents typically have more difficulty with school work, receive inadequate healthcare, and often have poorer nutritional habits.

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha's College of Education, discussions related to the city's literacy rankings led to a focus on a community engagement project promoting family literacy in the community during the 2008-2009 school year and marking the 100 years since the founding of the university. It was expected that our university centennial celebration could provide us with access to lecture series funds we could share with the community. To gather community interest in literacy celebrations, we needed collaborative partners to help plan mutually beneficial programming that would reach the community. As the university professor leading the project, I began visiting with the directors of our public library system and local museums about their interest in forming a partnership and building a coalition to promote family literacy.

Enthusiasm bubbled and ideas transformed as the coalition began to grow. We quickly realized that many community resources, such as the zoo, botanical gardens, and children's museum (in addition to the library branches), were already offering story-time sessions to the community. Questions began to emerge. Would the admission cost of story events already offered (typically the cost of admission) be a deterrent to families we

wanted to reach? Would storytellers draw families? What was the best way to advertise? It immediately became apparent that as a coalition, we held potential to try some new ideas together, write grants for additional funding by using lecture series dollars as matching funds, and draw upon a pool of multiple strengths and talents from each organization. Through cooperating instead of competing, we could develop a common voice that would be louder than disparate single voices.

Today, our coalition includes several local school districts and a growing number of community venues. We formed the coalition with the common goal to promote literacy among young children and their families. We call ourselves the *Omaha Family Literacy Partnership*.

Although each coalition member brings different interests and purposes to the table, our common goal for our work together continues to center on promoting reading among children and their families in our community. Focusing on this singular goal enabled us to bring our strengths together to collaboratively sponsor the event featuring the story singer Dennis Warner, a story actor known as Idu Maduli who is an African traditional story specialist, and storytellers Rita Paskowitz of

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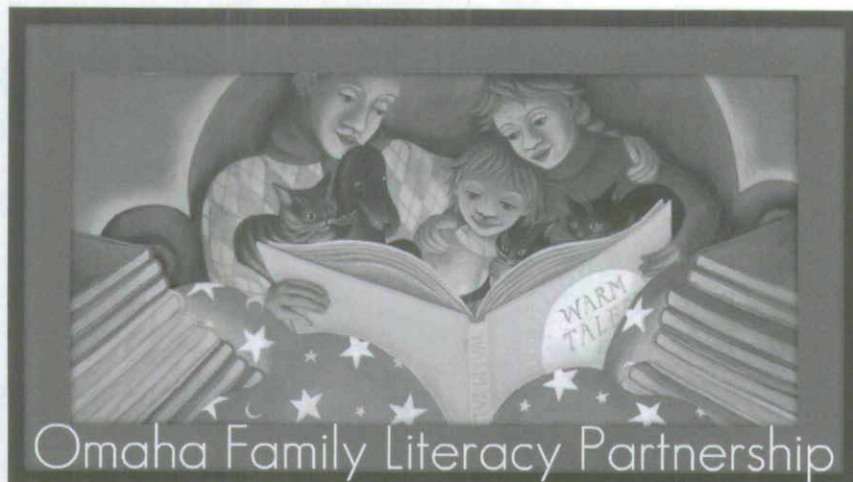


Figure 2: Having a logo that visually represents our mission is vital to communication. Image used with permission from Lauren Stringer; © Lauren Stringer from her book *Winter is the Warmest Season* published by Harcourt Children's Books, 2006.

the Judaic tradition and Sheila Rocha who specializes in Latino traditional stories. Additional projects sponsored multicultural award-winning authors and illustrators of children's books in our community and schools. All of the performances were free and open to the public.

Rationale for Community Engagement

Our coalition work is fueled by theory and research that demonstrates the power of local community on developing responsible, caring, and healthy young people. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of social ecology underscores the importance of the broader community on child development: the child is situated in the center of an entire network of interactions and interdependencies inclusive of family, school, local community, and culture. In addition, research identifying community "assets" that promote the development of caring, responsible, healthy young people includes not only the crucial role of family and schools, but also the importance of the larger community environment (Search Institute, 2005). In particular, our coalition projects meet the Search Institute's "empowerment asset" sending a message through our work that the community cherishes its children by including them in community life (p. 1). Coalition projects further meet a "constructive use of time" asset by providing community programs (p. 1). Lastly, we address a "commitment to learning" asset by promoting early literacy in our community (p. 1). Currently, at least 10 com-

munity venues (the local zoo, art museum, library, and others) and local school districts are part of our Omaha Family Literacy Partnership.

Our approach to promoting literacy in the community involves a variety of partners and public settings. The *Beads on One String* performances featuring storytellers, a story actor, and a story singer had its kick-off event on campus and satisfied our "lecture" requirement in a rather entertaining, if unusual, way. After the evening performance on campus, artists were disbursed to area schools in 11 different school districts, three after-school programs, and 10 library branches over the course of three days. The group came back together again for a grand celebration at the Durham Museum with more story singing, acting, and telling. Each of our projects is an attempt at immersing the community in the message that reading to children is important by offering story celebrations.

Further incentive for building our coalition is the economy of sharing. By sharing speakers between coalition partners, we typically receive a better rate because they stay in one place longer than the typical one-day booking. Having speakers in town for several days minimizes advertising costs while maximizing exposure (see poster in Figure 1). Another cost savings results from booking local, professional storytellers rather than paying travel fees for out-of-towners. We also found that each coalition partner had something to give to the project—something they already had. For

example, for the *Beads on One String* presentation at the Durham Museum on Saturday morning, the university lecture series paid for speakers while museum administrators waived admission fees and donated the use of space. The library offered high-quality, self-published bookmarks that served to advertise our events to schools. In later projects during our centennial year, we were able to identify these partnership gifts as in-kind donations that served as matching funds for grants.

Finally, rationale for the work of our partnership is documented in positive comments from students, teachers, and community members who participated in events. Idu Maduli shared thank you notes received from students after he led them on a story-acting adventure.

Reflections

Looking back, we realize our successful projects were fueled by a common goal valued by all partners (in our case, family literacy). The *Beads on One String* project was a great beginning to our Centennial Lecture Series and the Omaha Family Literacy Partnership. Our shared mission fostered grant-writing activities and also allowed us to make compromises when needed. We believe successful projects are contingent on good communication

and respect. Finally, we found, like the competitive villagers in the story *Stone Soup*, that if we each shared something we already had, we were able to create more than we dreamed possible.

Author's Note

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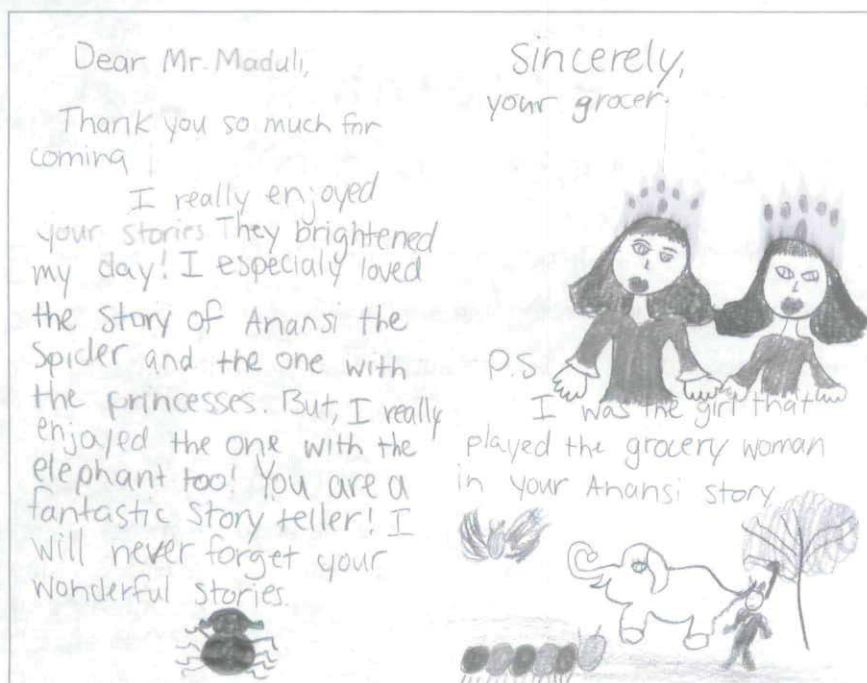


Figure 3: One student's note of thanks to Idu Maduli for his presentation and her reflections on her experience as a "grocer" in his story.